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ABSTRACT

Although it is commonly considered that personality characteristics are stable over long periods of time, some recent theorists have questioned this view. In order to examine a number of personality, social, and family oriented characteristics, 44 women were interviewed three times (at young adulthood, middle age and young old age) over a 40 year time span. In a small and partial replication 28 men were interviewed on two occasions. Psychologists also rated subjects on a number of personal characteristics e.g., health, energy, worrisomeness, brutality, and cognitive problems, several times during the course of the study. Data analyses indicated that stability of child and family oriented dimensions of personal/social characteristics (marital adjustment, family emotional tone, child resented/favored) was high over all time comparisons. Marital adjustment was consistent for the women but not for the men. Consistency in discipline and in the emotional tone of the family showed the highest across-time associations; the child-resented dimension, however, showed a strong negative correlation. Stability was also evident in the personal dimensions. Young adult-middle age correlations were strong for energy as they were for health, nervous stability, and brutality. These correlations for the 15, 23, and 40 year intervals indicate evidence for the stability of the personal/social dimensions of personality over adulthood. (AG)

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STABILITY OF PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS THROUGHOUT ADULTHOOD

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, August 23-27, 1982.

Stability of Personality Characteristics Throughout Adulthood

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Although it is commonly considered that personality characteristics are stable over long periods of time and under a wide variety of circumstances, some recent theorists have questioned this view. For example, Mischel (1968), while recognizing the longitudinal coherence of personality, questions the cross-situational generality of behavior. Bem and Allen (1974) found, in addition, that there are important individual differences in cross-situational variability of behavior. The issue of stability of dimensions across adulthood cannot be resolved without the use of long-term longitudinal studies of adults, and until recently no such study was available.

Some consistent personality characteristics have been identified in groups of people who have been studied longitudinally from infancy or childhood into adulthood. Bronson described substantial continuities in the traits of emotional expressiveness and reactivity-control from childhood through adolescence (1967) and into young adulthood (1972) in the Guidance Study (GS) members. Tuddenham (1959), studying the Oakland Growth Study (OGS) members from adolescence into their mid-30s, found that the most stable variables were those of expressiveness and expansive spontaneity versus inhibition, traits similar to those found by Bronson. Similar findings were reported by Kagan and Moss (1962) for the Fels group, studied from infancy to young adulthood. Block and associates found considerable individual differences in consistency of personality of OGS members from early adolescence

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into the 30s (Block, in collaboration with Haan, 1971) and the 40s (Block, 1981): some people were "impressively predictable" and others "unrecognizable" over those time spans.

An examination of stability of personality and social characteristics across adulthood into old age has not been possible until recently, because of the paucity of longitudinal studies of aging persons. Some stability has been found over shorter time periods (4 to 15 years) in the participants of the Bonn (Gromback, 1976; Thomae, 1976; Thomae Lehr, & Schmitz-Scherzer, 1981), the Duke (Siegler, George, & Okun, 1979), and the Baltimore (McCrea, Costa, & Arenberg, 1980) longitudinal studies. In addition, a group of women, mothers of the GS children, rated on a set of intellectual and personality-social characteristics when their children were infants and again 40 years later (Mussen, Eichorn, Honzik, Bieber, & Meredith, 1980), showed impressive consistency in intellectual functioning and in many personality-social characteristics as well.

The study reported here examines a number of personality, social, and family oriented characteristics that were measured at several intervals over 40 years when the study participants were in young adulthood (YA), in middle age (MA), and were in young-old age (YO). Five dimensions were measured at all three interviews; in addition, nine more were rated in YA, twelve in MA and three in YO.

Method

Subjects

The primary subjects are a group of 44 women who are mothers of some of the Guidance Study children at the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley, who were intensively interviewed three times over a span of 40 years. In addition, a small and partial replication examines 28 men, fathers of the GS children, who were intensively interviewed on two occasions.

The original group of parents was a representative sample of those of child bearing years in Berkeley at that time, for their children were a sample of every third baby born in Berkeley in 1928-1929. These parents were very similar to

their national census cohort at that time. differing only as might be expected in a college town: they had more education and more labor-saving appliances in their homes, but their incomes were lower (Eichorn, 1973). Although attrition was to some extent selective, still they are broadly representative of surviving persons of their cohort. Every educational level is represented, as is every occupational level. Compared with other GS parents, this group shows a slight trend to have experienced less financial strain when their children entered the study or when they were 17. A trend toward higher SES and education was observed. The occupations of these men were significantly higher than those of the men who are not represented here. The average age at the time of the last follow-up was 67.9 for the women and 71.2 for the men, with a range of 59 to 80. The average IQ in 1969 was 119, with a range of 81 to 150.

Intensive interviews were carried out at the beginning of the GS in 1928-1929, again in 1945-1947, and in 1968-1969, and the parents were seen at intervals throughout their children's childhood. Ratings of a number of personal characteristics were made at several times during this 40-year period. These ratings were made by several groups of psychologists over this long time span. Ratings that were made two or three times will be examined here.

Rated Characteristics

The ratings themselves were originally selected and defined by Macfarlane (1938) some 50 years ago. Since the GS had an interactive "biosocial" orientation, ratings made reflected this stance. All except three of the 17 ratings used a 5-point scale. [1] For the most part these are not strictly personality trait variables. Since the original ratings were made because the men and women were the parents of the GS children, it is not surprising that the greater number of variables have to do with dyadic relationships with the child and spouse as well as with the family as a whole. Others are ratings of social roles at the three time periods. In addition, another group of variables, designated "personal" variables in Table 1,

may be descriptive of the person with less regard for external circumstances. All ratings were based on behavioral and "common sense" scales, so that the different groups of raters understood them similarly. This may have facilitated the high correlations that were obtained across the years and across the differing theoretical backgrounds of the raters. Because different numbers of ratings could be made based on each interview, the three time comparisons include differing numbers of character dimensions.

Method of Rating

The YA ratings are averages of ratings made on several occasions between 1929 and 1933 by IHD researchers who were familiar with the parents (Macfarlane, 1938). All YO ratings were made more recently by a group of raters working in 1979-1980 from transcripts of the earlier interviews. In the recent codings in most cases two independent raters coded each interview, and disagreements were resolved in conference. These ratings were "blind" as well, for no rater rated the same parent at two time periods (Field, 1981). The MA ratings were made as follows: eight of the 17 ratings were made in the 1940s in a manner similar to the YA ratings made earlier. In addition, 16 of the 17 ratings were made in 1979-1980 by the same group of raters who did the YO ratings. Finally, for eight of the 17 MA ratings the values used here are averages of the 1940s ratings and the 1979-1980 ratings. In all cases the original Macfarlane (1938) categories formed the basis for the ratings, and the same rating system was used at all three times. It is remarkable that so many of the questions asked by Macfarlane and associates some 50 years ago continue to be of such interest.

Not all ratings were made at each time. In some cases ratings that were appropriate to the child-rearing years were not made on the parents in young-old age, and three new ratings were added in the recent codings. The 17 variables of interest in this paper are shown in Table 1.

The time span in each of these comparisons is approximately 15 years for

YA-MA, 23 years for MA-YO, and nearly 40 years for YA-YO.

Analysis

Pearson product-moment correlations were the first level of analysis: each rating was correlated with the comparable rating at each time comparison to assess the stability of each variable across time. Men's and women's ratings were assessed separately.

In addition, because many of these variables are intercorrelated at each of the three life periods, it seemed desirable to determine whether there might be a smaller number of underlying dimensions. Ordinary methods of factor analysis were not suitable because they cannot take into account the repeated measures nature of the data. Repeated measures of the same variables on the same individuals clearly cannot be said to be independent. Fortunately, a solution to this problem has recently been developed by Meredith and Bieber (Bieber, 1979; Mussen et al, 1980) which they call stationary factor analysis (SFA). [2] It is an extension of Jöreskog's model and attempts to maximize the stability of the dimensions across time. Through this method it is possible to extract factors common to two or more time periods that are stationary over time, as well as factors that are specific to each time period. The technique is succinctly described in Mussen et al (1980).

The women are the focus of interest here because three time periods can be compared. Accordingly, three SFAs examine the comparisons YA-MA, MA-YO, and YA-YO, and the fourth searches for factors that are stationary over all three time periods.

Results

Correlations of Ratings

Women's ratings. An examinations of the product-moment correlations for the women in Table 1 reveals many impressively strong associations in all time comparisons: whether the time span was 15, 23, or 40 years. Sixty-seven percent of all the women's comparisons showed significant correlations over these lengthy spans. Visual inspection suggests that the correlations are greater at the YA-MA time;

however the dimensions being measured are not the same in all comparisons. There are five dimensions that were rated at all three times, and these can be directly compared. The weighted average of these five (McNemar, 1955) is .41 for the YA-MA comparison, .30 for MA-YO, and .35 for the longest time span, YA-YO. There is little diminution in the association of these dimensions even over so many years.

An examination of each of the dimensions separately found that the association of marital adjustment ratings at YA and YO were significantly more highly correlated than they were at MA-YO, $t(54) = 1.89$, $p < .02$. Social Adjustment was significantly more highly correlated in the YA-MA comparison than in YA-YO, $t(46) = 2.21$, $p < .05$. Health was significantly more highly correlated in the YA-MA comparison than in YA-YO, $t(44) = 4.22$, $p < .001$, or in MA-YO, $t(54) = 3.26$, $p < .01$. Three of the four significant differences were in favor of the YA-MA comparison. This comparison spanned approximately 15 years, the least number of years of any of the comparisons. However, since these two times are both part of the child-rearing years, it seems as likely that common life experiences led to the higher correlations.

Although it is not possible to compare the three types of dimensions, since not all variables were rated at each time, visual inspection suggests that there are greater changes in time in social relationships, for correlations are lower overall for these three variables. Child and family oriented variables and personal variables all tend to maintain high correlations in all time comparisons. Although one risks being charged with mixing apples and oranges (or apples, oranges, plums, grapes, and pears) when combining several variables and several time periods, it is tempting to find the weighted averages of the three types of women's ratings. When this is done, the child-oriented dimensions have an average correlation of .35 (or .45 if the puzzling child resented-favored rating is deleted), the personal dimensions average .41, and the social relationship variables average only .21.

Men's ratings. Since only one time comparison, YA-YO, was available for the men, only five variables are included in Table 2. Their weighted average is .26, lower than the comparable average for the women. Although the number of men is small, two of the correlations are statistically significant: leisure time and health.

Comparing men's and women's ratings. The significant correlations for the women in YA-YO, marital adjustment and energy, were quite low for the men; and leisure time and health, significantly correlated for the men, were low for the women. Because there are so few comparisons and because Ns are small, one can do no more than observe that the pattern is not the same for men and women.

Table 3 shows the means for the five dimensions that can be compared. The men were rated slightly more favorably on average at both times, but only two of these differences were significant. Although the mean values for marital adjustment indicated that adjustment was improved for both men and women in the later years, the improvement for the men was much greater, and the men's marital adjustment rating became significantly higher than the women's in YO, $t(67) = 2.75$, $p < .01$. The very low correlation for the men indicates, however, that changes were taking place in the marriages over the 40 years. What changes these were can be discovered with further study. In addition, the women were rated as having better social adjustment in YA, $t(40) = 2.22$, $p < .05$.

Stationary Factor Analyses

The correlations over these long time periods are impressive in themselves, but in addition the results of the SAFs are reported here with the caution that they are exploratory analyses, only. Because of the small number of women (N = 44) and small number of dimensions available (5 to 14), the results are likely to be unstable. [3]

Four SFAs were carried out on the women's data. There were too few men to warrant such an analysis. The first SFA examined the characteristics that were

rated at all three times. Because only five variables were available, a maximum of two factors could be extracted. Table 4 reveals that one factor did emerge that was common to all three periods. This seems to be a general adjustment factor, and all five ratings appear in the factor at some time. Most prominent throughout are social adjustment and energy.

The remaining SFAs analyze each of the time comparisons separately and seek out stationary and unique factors in each of the two times that are compared. Table 5 shows the results of the YA-YO comparison, a time span of nearly 40 years. The same five variables were available for comparison here. A comparison of Tables 4 and 5 shows that the single factor of adjustment emerges even more strongly in the YA-YO comparison.

The comparison of MA and YO, spanning 23 years, examines the relationship of the same five ratings and three others that were measured only at those two times. Table 6 shows that the same general adjustment factor is extracted, with the addition of the variable involvement outside the family at both time periods. In addition, a second factor common to both periods is found. This includes marital adjustment, involvement in the family, and a rating of possible cognitive problems.

Finally, the YA and MA ratings are compared with a SFA. As Table 7 shows, 14 ratings were available for these periods. This analysis shows quite different results. The general adjustment factor has disappeared from importance in YA, and only appears in MA in altered and weakened form. The stationary factor common to both times includes ratings of personal characteristics of irritability, worrisomeness, and nervous stability, as well as the more family oriented characteristics of solicitousness and emotional tone of family. No other convincing factors were extracted. In an effort to determine whether the additional variables were responsible for the differences found, a final SFA was made including only the five common variables. No factor at all was extracted for the YA period, but in MA a factor

including leisure, social adjustment, and marital adjustment appeared, indicating real differences in this comparison.

The intercorrelations of factor scores were examined. Since one factor emerged as predominant in each of the four analyses, one would expect that this factor would show a fairly high association over time. This is indeed the case for each of the comparisons of two time periods, for the correlations between the factors over the years is .49 for YA-MA, .58 for MA-YO, and .31 for YA-YO, indicating considerable continuity over time in the composition of the dominant factor. (There are no known means of estimating the significance of these correlations.)

The intercorrelations of factor scores in the three-time SFA are puzzling. Although Factor 1 is correlated at MA and YO: .48, it is negatively correlated at YA-MA: -.45, and at YA-YO: -.20. These unstable correlations probably reflect the combination of small numbers of variables and small numbers of subjects, rather than real changes in the factors over time.

Discussion

It is clear that the stability of many personality characteristics in childhood and young adulthood found by the Fels, Guidance, and Oakland Growth Studies, as well as the shorter-term stability in older people found by the Baltimore,Bonn, and Duke studies is also found across young adulthood, middle age, and young-old age in this study of the Guidance Study parents.

The greatest caution must be exercised in interpreting the stationary factor analyses. Because of the uniqueness of the data set as well as the novelty of the method of analysis it was deemed worthwhile to report the results of these analyses. Credibility is increased by the fact that one very similar factor was extracted in almost all analyses.

It is noteworthy that so many of the across-time correlations exceeded the "magic" .30 that Bem and Allen (197[illegible] described as typical of across-situation studies of personality characteristics. The ratings reported here, of course, are

longitudinal, but it might be argued that the situations were to some extent constant: ratings were made by psychologists who based each judgment on a variety of evidence contained in intensive interviews in the homes of the participants (MA and YO) and in several observations both in the homes and at the clinic in the beginning years (YA). The size of many of the correlations argues for real stability over long periods of time. Two-thirds of the cross-time correlations are statistically significant, and they compare favorably with those found over shorter periods in other longitudinal studies of adults.

There is no evidence for stability of social relationships over time; indeed, it may be that different qualities are required in order to be judged high in social adjustment in the child rearing and elderly years.

Stability appears to be the rule, however, for the child and family oriented dimensions, where 75% of all the women's correlations are .40 or better. Marital adjustment shows consistency over all time comparisons for the women, though not for the men. Consistency of discipline and emotional tone of family show the highest across-time associations. The negative correlation of child resented-favored (see footnote 1 for its descriptors) may highlight some real changes in the relationship of many parents and their children between the preschool and adolescent years: at ease with the child in one period but out of sympathy in the other. A rather similar finding was reported by Mussen et al (1980): the correlation across forty years for the dimension interest in child was almost zero. Unfortunately, the child-oriented variables could not be evaluated in YO, when the "child" was 40 years old ano no longer subject to discipline, protectiveness, and so on.

Examining the personal dimensions, stability is again evident. Although the associations appear to be stronger in the correlations of YA-MA, a 15-year span, energy shows strong correlations in all comparisons. Sixty four percent of the correlations attain .40 or better. The strongest YA-MA correlations are health, nervous stability, and a rating of brutality. Once again, the nature of the YO interview precludes ratings being made of some of these personal characteristics.

Bem and Allen (1974) found individual differences in cross-situational correlations of personality traits and suggested that the individual must be considered as well as the situations when assessing the coherence of behavior. Thomae (1976) argued that because of the complexity of the interaction of processes it may be necessary to turn to single-case studies of personality in aging persons. Block (1981) also reported great individual differences in stability of traits in his longitudinal assessment of young adults. He argued that the question should not be "are people consistent over time?" but rather which sorts of people are consistent and which are not.

The analyses reported here were unable to take individual differences into account, but future work will pursue this potentially fruitful area. Indeed, an old-old age follow-up of the survivors of this group and other Berkeley study parents is now in progress. The overriding impression of the interviewers to date has been of remarkable consistency within themselves in old-old age. To do justice to these very old persons who are so "together" probably will require a case-study methodology.

The correlations reported here for approximately 15, 23, and 40 years are impressive evidence for stability of personal-social dimensions over adulthood. The importance of this unique data set, in which a representative sample of men and women were interviewed at several times throughout their adulthood, assures that further analyses will be of value.

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Footnotes

1. For example, four quite different ratings, all of which had high correlations over time, had the following descriptors: Energy level: "1. very high activity level, exceptional output, quick moving, works and plays energetically; 2. above average. enjoys activity for its own sake; 3. average, activity adjusted to demands, occasional activity for its own sake; 4. below average; 5. work or play at a low energy level, sedentary in leisure time, characteristically inactive." Emotional tone of family: "1. extremely somber atmosphere, life and parenthood a very serious business, little fun; 2. atmosphere more somber than average; 3. normally happy, occasional upsets with cause; 4. atmosphere for most part above average in gaiety and happiness; 5. spontaneous, gay, extremely happy atmosphere, full of fun." Consistency of discipline: "1. absurd inconsistency, discipline depends on moods of parent, child never knows what to expect; 2. more inconsistent than average; 3. for most part consistent, occasional upsets, enough pliability to meet needs sensibly; 4. more consistent than average; 5. rigid consistency - with either good or bad techniques." Child resented-favored: "1. child acutely resented to the point of mistreatment; 2. child not overtly mistreated but chronic resentment and criticism, great favoritism to another child; 3. treated as sibs save for occasional disciplinary episodes; 4. favored, but not overtly so; 5. openly favored, indulged."

2. I am indebted to William Meredith and Howard Terry for their advice and help in carrying out these analyses.

3. Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7, showing all factor loadings for all variables, are available from the author. For ease of viewing, the tables given here show loadings of .25 and over, only. It must be emphasized that loadings of less than .30 cannot be interpreted.

TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS OF RATINGS
OF WOMEN'S PERSONALITY-SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS
MADE IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD, MIDDLE AGE, AND YOUNG-OLD AGE

	YA-MA	MA-YO	YA-YO
CHILD AND FAMILY ORIENTED			
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT	*.45	**.43	***.72
INVOLVEMENT WITH FAMILY		*.28	
EMOTIONAL TONE OF FAMILY	**.56		
CONSISTENCY OF DISCIPLINE	***.56		
OVERPROTECTIVENESS	*.40		
SOLICITOUSNESS	.11		
CHILD RESENTED/FAVORED	*-.44		
SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS			
SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	*.49	.02	-.11
LEISURE	*.35	.06	.32
INVOLVEMENT OUTSIDE FAMILY		*.33	
PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS			
HEALTH	***.68	.25	.11
ENERGY	*.35	**.51	*.40
COGNITIVE PROBLEMS		.24	
IRRITABILITY	*.40		
NERVOUS STABILITY	***.69		
WORRISOMENESS	*.40		
BRUTALITY	**.47		

NOTE: * $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS OF RATINGS
OF MEN'S PERSONALITY-SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS
MADE IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD, MIDDLE AGE, AND YOUNG-OLD AGE

	YA-YO
CHILD AND FAMILY ORIENTED	
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT	.02
SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS	
SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	.24
LEISURE	*.40
PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS	
HEALTH	*.38
ENERGY	.25

NOTE: * $p < .05$

TABLE 3

MEANS AND S.D.S OF MEN AND WOMEN
FOR THE FIVE COMMON VARIABLES
MEASURED IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD AND YOUNG-OLD AGE

	YA				YO			
	MEN		WOMEN		MEN		WOMEN	
	MEAN	S.D.	MEAN	S.D.	MEAN	S.D.	MEAN	S.D.
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT	3.00	.71	3.16	.95	1.93	1.05	2.66	1.13
SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	3.20	.86	2.61	.76	2.57	.92	2.57	1.04
LEISURE	3.45	.83	3.23	.76	2.45	1.28	2.82	1.38
HEALTH	2.32	.83	2.97	.90	2.11	1.09	2.31	1.07
ENERGY	2.52	1.06	2.67	1.04	2.37	.97	2.76	1.10

TABLE 4

STATIONARY FACTOR ANALYSIS
ALL THREE MEASUREMENT PERIODS – WOMEN

	YA		MA		YO	
	F_1	F_2	F_1	F_2	F_1	F_2
LEISURE	.31	.32			.55	
ENERGY	.47		.26		.37	
SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	.43		.51		.44	
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT	.27	.27	.28	.50		.36
HEALTH			.30		.35	

TABLE 5

STATIONARY FACTOR ANALYSIS

YOUNG ADULTHOOD AND YOUNG-OLD AGE -- WOMEN

	YA		YO	
	F_1	F_2	F_1	F_2
LEISURE	.35		.53	
ENERGY	.50		.43	
SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	.51		.42	
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT		.42		.43
HEALTH	.31		.42	

TABLE 6

STATIONARY FACTOR ANALYSIS

MIDDLE AGE AND YOUNG-OLD AGE -- WOMEN

	YA			YO		
	F_1	F_2	F_3	F_1	F_2	F_3
LEISURE			-.29	.53		
ENERGY	.45			.43		
SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT	.34	.44		.28		
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT		.32			.40	
HEALTH	.40		.54	.40		
COGNITIVE PROBLEMS		.26			.41	
FAMILY INVOLVEMENT	.25	.57			.44	
OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENT	.53			.40		

TABLE 7

STATIONARY FACTOR ANALYSIS

YOUNG ADULTHOOD AND MIDDLE AGE -- WOMEN

	YA			MA		
	F_1	F_2	F_3	F_1	F_2	F_3
LEISURE						-.31
ENERGY						.31
SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT					.27	
MARITAL ADJUSTMENT					.41	
HEALTH						.40
IRRITABILITY	.36			.28		
WORRISOMENESS	.42			.39		
SOLICITOUSNESS	.25			.51		
OVERPROTECTIVENESS		.35			.25	
BRUTALITY		-.33				
CONSISTENCY OF DISCIPLINE			.48			
NERVOUS STABILITY	.38			.26		
EMOTIONAL TONE OF FAMILY				.33		
CHILD RESENTED/FAVORED						